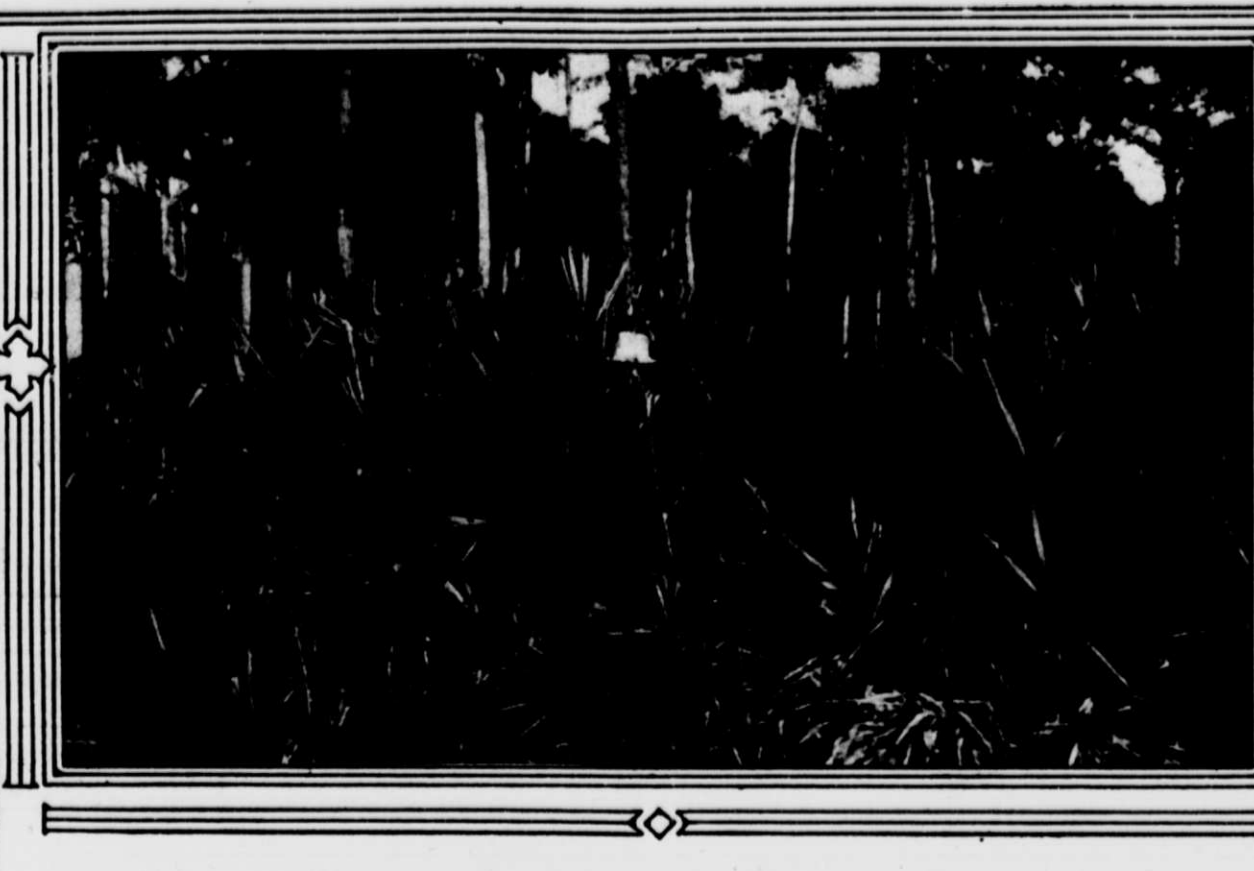


TRAILING REPTILES IN THE FLORIDA EVERGLADES



A pair of king snakes.



Hunting in the saw palmetto.



A gopher snake.

Experiences of Two New York Scientists Hunting Diamond Backed Rattlers and Cotton Mouths in the Palmetto Patches of the South

By OPHIDOLUS.

IT was our first trip into the South, and came after many months of planning by my partner and I; in fact we planned so much that the vast amount of information, or misinformation, that we received misled and confused us until we hardly knew just when and where to go, and finally wound up by going at the wrong time.

We arrived at our destination, about 125 miles south of Jacksonville, on Sunday morning, March 8, 1914, and found the weather unseasonably cold, a chill northwest wind blowing a stiff breeze, which was in strange contrast to the semi-tropical appearance of the country.

Shortly before noon we met the man who was to act as our guide, Bob, we will call him, and he told us that the weather was entirely too cold for the success of our quest, as the snakes, especially the big diamond backs, would all be lying under shelter, but he was willing to try. He suggested that we go up the St. Johns River in his launch for about fifty miles to the camp of an old hunter, as that section of the country was wild and there would be apt to be more snakes there for the reason that there was no one to kill them off.

The next morning we started, after some delay, on our trip up the St. Johns River, Bob's brother and a friend accompanying us. The wind had died down and it was somewhat warmer.

Large numbers of ospreys wheeled overhead, now and then one would drop into the water and on rising shake itself and slowly fly away with a shining wringing fish in its claws to some dead tree where it could enjoy its meal. Several cormorants were dozing on a channel stake, on the banks and in the shallow water stood many great blue and little blue herons, with an occasional white heron. Snake birds perched on the trees along the bank. Coots walked over the water hyacinth and swam in the shallows; great bald eagles soared majestically overhead or rested on the trees and scrags in the prairie; the buzzards were, of course, ever present, and wild ducks of several varieties were constantly rising from the nearby sloughs and ponds, and various species of hawks were to be seen hunting over the prairie, while on every hand the killdeer plovers piped his shrill cry and the purple grackle and redwing blackbird added their presence to the multitude of bird life. Turtles sunned themselves on the fallen trees, but no alligators were seen on the trip up the river.

The river was broad here and there and for a short distance the banks were fairly high and covered with palms and moss covered trees, but for the most of the way the banks were but a few inches above the water level and in many places it was difficult to tell whether you were headed along the river channel or running into a slough. One could see for miles ahead over the level prairie, dotted with small "hummocks" covered with palms, the only places out of water during the high water season, when this whole broad expanse is under water.

We passed into Lake Harney, a large shallow lake whose white sandy shores glistened in the sunlight, and our launch rolled and tossed in the choppy sea kicked up by the strong wind which had a good sweep across the lake.

We were about an hour crossing this lake, and after passing through the narrow and crooked channel at the other end entered Puzzle Lake, a lake only because it is wider than the general width of the river, and caused by the overflow of the surrounding low land, and Puzzle because of the difficulty in distinguishing the channel from the innumerable sloughs.

Just before dusk, when it seemed to me that we must be nearly to the Everglades, the guide pointed to a cabin at the edge of the palm forest and said that it was our destination and in a few minutes we tied the launch up to the bank and started to walk to it, about a quarter of a mile across the prairie.

As we walked we noticed there were two houses about fifty feet apart, surrounded by lofty palms and moss covered oaks. We had expected to walk straight to the place, but as we neared it we saw a wide slough between us and it, which proved to be too deep to ford and too long to walk around, and we were met with a loud disapproval from several hounds on the other side.

In answer to their noisy protests a woman came out of one of the houses

and we asked her to give us some supper and board us for a few days, to which she replied that we could have our supper and she could bunk us as long as we liked, but we would have to do our own cooking.

In a short while her husband came in a skiff and ferried us across and about an hour later we had our first meal of "grease and grits" with some very nice biscuits, corn bread and guava jam.

Of the two houses one was a small frame building with a piazza, used to sleep and live in. The other one was to cook and eat in; this house was about ten feet wide and fifteen feet long. It was merely a frame boarded over and placed on piers about three feet from the ground.

About 300 yards from the house on the edge of an orange and grapefruit grove was a long shack with six rooms, each about nine feet square, and furnished with a bed, washstand and a chair or two; two of the rooms had kitchens attached. This shack was built for the accommodation of sportsmen.

It was quite dark when we had set ourselves in our new quarters, as we built a roaring fire under the palms for the night was quite cold. The next morning the weather was much warmer and we were up bright and early. After breakfast we started to hunt for the snakes. We had not gone far before we had several fine specimens of back racer (*Zamenis corymbosa*). These snakes differ slightly

from our Northern racer in having more white on the chin and lip plates, a brown nose and a brown line running from the nose over the eye. In comparing the large number of these snakes which we subsequently caught they do not appear to attain so large a size as the Northern phase, nor do they seem to be so ready to flee at the least alarm, but when once started they were not long in disappearing into the brush, unless promptly grabbed.

We had hunted through the tall switch grass looking for the cottonmouth moccasin (*Ancistrodon piscivorus*), but it was almost useless, as the grass was shoulder high and thick and it was next to impossible to see a snake, and I do not doubt that we passed by many a one that day.

We caught several of the Southern phase of garter snake (*Eutania sirtalis*), a beautifully marked snake, distinctly green body color, the dark stripes checkered with black squares like the pattern on a checker board.

In a small pond we captured several of the banded water snakes (*Tropidonotus fasciatus*). One, a large and richly marked specimen, was lying coiled under the water, which was about four inches deep, and lying as he was among the short growth of vegetation I nearly stepped on him before I saw him. On placing the forked stick over him he wound up it as far as he could and struck viciously at everything in reach, but was soon grasped by the neck and placed into a bag. These water snakes, though non-venomous, were by a great majority of the people we met thought to be very poisonous.

Numbers of the American chameleons (*Anolis carolinensis*) and ground lizards (*Lycosoma laterale*) were seen and some fine specimens captured.

We hunted each day through the palm forest and along the edge of the prairie, turning over the fallen palm fans, breaking open the hollow palm logs and

prying into everything in general. Many snakes were uncovered in turning over the fans; mostly very young cottonmouths, which very strongly resemble the young copperheads (*Ancistrodon contortrix*) and the pygmy rattlers (*Sistrurus miliarius*). This diminutive rattlesnake would generally be found coiled on the projecting base of a palm and covered by a palm fan. None that we caught made any attempt to escape, but they were ready to do mischief if they had the chance. They were so small, generally from twelve to eighteen inches, that their rattling could not be heard unless held close to the ear.

My partner had a narrow escape from being bitten by one of them. He had broken open a hollow log on the inside of which were a number of empty shells of snake eggs—probably the kingsnake or blacksnake—and as he reached to pick one of them up for closer examination, he caught sight of a pygmy rattler coiled partly under some pieces of the rotting core of the log and jerked his hand away just in time, for the little snake struck viciously, narrowly missing it.

We broke open all the hollow logs which we found and in doing so found several very fine specimens of the kingsnake (*Ophibolus getulus*). Usually when we found one we would find another one very close by. These snakes, while of a rather quarrelsome disposition among themselves or with other snakes, are remarkably gentle with man. Not one of the several we caught made any attempt to bite, nor showed any nervousness. When handled they would usually coil tightly around the arm, probably to prevent falling, and then would start slowly on an exploring expedition. These snakes are powerful constrictors, feeding principally upon obnoxious rodents and other snakes; they have been known to kill the deadly diamondback rattlesnake (*Crotalus adamanteus*), although they have no preference and will as readily kill and

devour the non-venomous species. The action of the venom of poisonous snakes has no bad effect on this snake, as it is entirely immune to snake poison. It may thus be seen that the kingsnake is of considerable economic value. It was not uncommon to find these snakes living around barns or the edge of orange groves, where they have regular sunning places and are never disturbed by the owners of the land. The coloration of these snakes varied considerably; some had light brown saddles, separated by yellowish bands forked at the sides, forming a chainlike pattern; on others the saddles were dark brown or black with yellowish white bands, with, of course, the chainlike pattern.

Our decaying log which we broke open contained a fine scarlet kingsnake (*Ophibolus dollatus coccineus*), its body ringed with yellow, black and red, very closely resembling the poisonous coral snake (*Elaeophis fulvus*).

We broke down the hollow trunk of a dead palm, breaking it off close to the ground, and in the bottom, curled up asleep, was a raccoon, apparently undisturbed by the tearing down of the roof over its head. We held one of our snake bags over the hole at the end of the tree trunk and another over the break at the base, then awoke the coon by a poke with a stick. It went into the bag at the base of the tree and a very lively time ensued. The holder of the bag had the coon all right, but didn't have time to decide just what he was going to do with it. Finally after some maneuvering the mouth of the bag was twisted and tied, but on reaching home the coon proceeded to tear the bag to pieces, and as our guides were quite anxious to have some fresh meat it was killed and eaten—that is, it was eaten by the rest of our party; the writer, having once tasted coon, had no desire to try any of this one.

While hunting along the edge of the prairie, near a small stream bordered by a stretch of marshy land on each

side, from a great part of which the tall switch grass had been burned, we came upon the cave of an alligator, which is a burrow under the turf with a small pool of water at the mouth. The tracks at the entrance told us that in all probability the tenant was at home, so the writer squatted at the entrance ready to grab the gator's snout while the guide used one of our poles with an iron spike on the end to jab through the turf into the burrow. About eight feet back of the entrance he struck the gator, which immediately came out, but did not come to the top of the pool. It quickly backed into the hole, but another jab or so sent it out again, and this time it was grabbed by the snout and pulled out. It was then the writer's turn to have a few exciting moments, for the gator, while only about five feet long, was surprisingly strong and twisted, wriggled and thrashed with its tail in a very disconcerting manner. Its jaws were finally tied shut and it was carried home. It would raise its body clear of the ground and run with considerable speed; in fact, it was surprisingly quick in all its movements. Care had to be taken in approaching it that it did not get an opportunity to use its many sharp teeth.

Here in the woods we secured specimens of the ring necked snake (*Diadophis punctatus*), the southern ribbon snake (*Eutaenia sackeni*) and Bauer's box turtle (*Cistudo hauri*).

There were a great many cardinal birds and mourning doves around our camp, with an occasional mockingbird

and red headed woodpecker. Through the woods and in the clearings of our landlord were a number of coveys of quail. Outside of these there were not many birds except, of course, the herons, plover and ducks which would sit on a dead limb lying on our side of the slough from which it would dart into the water upon being approached and swim to the other side, usually with only its snake-like head and neck showing above the water, where it would walk out on the bank, spread its wings and stand motionless in that attitude until dried off. This bird has a peculiar flight, flying a short distance with quick beating of the wings and then soaring, with its long, slender head and neck stretched out at full length.

The night noises here were of great variety. Just before dusk the cattle would begin to come to the palms for the night and as the various bands met, the bulls with many a fierce battle would roar, grunt and groan, until it seemed as though all the bulls in the world were there, each trying to drown out the other, and they kept it up until quite dark. The plover plaintively whistled while trading back and forth from slough to slough; ducks quacked, herons croaked and squawked; owls hooted; fish splashed in the slough, and from the forest came various other sounds which we couldn't place.

The slough in front of our camp was alive with fish and turtles. There were also a number of alligators in it and we would occasionally see their eyes and nostrils projecting above the water. The days passed very quickly and almost before we knew it it was Friday night and our food about gone, so on Saturday morning we bade our friends good-bye and started back down the river. The trip down was uneventful, though we saw several alligators sunning themselves on the logs and banks. One was a very large one and it made a mighty splash as it dived into the water. We also saw a large cottonmouth sunning itself on the bank near the roots of a cypress tree, under which it escaped before we could catch it.

We arrived at our starting point along in the afternoon and after shipping our specimens to New York drove to the home of our guide on Lake Jesup, where we spent several days, obtaining quite a number more specimens, including several six line race runners (*Cnemidophorus sexlineatus*), a chicken snake (*Coluber obsoleteus quadrivittatus*) and a fine gopher or indigo snake (*Spizotes coral couperi*), which my partner found lying sunning on the stump of a tree. This snake made no attempt to escape, nor did it offer to bite or show any sign of ill temper when the writer walked up to it and picked it up. This species is another which is highly beneficial to mankind, as it feeds to a large extent upon rodents and is to be frequently found living on farms, where it is looked upon as being very useful and is not allowed to be disturbed.

There were reports of diamondback rattlesnakes having been seen in some of the palmetto patches, and these we hunted through without success.

Our guide was by profession a fisherman and twice during our stay the big seine was drawn at night; a large number of fish were caught, including large mouth black bass, perch, catfish, fish resembling the shad, but which were not edible, and some huge gars. The fish which were not edible were thrown up on the shore and provided a banquet for razorbacks, buzzards, herons, eagles and ospreys.

There was a great deal of game to be found here; plenty of quail, rabbits, raccoons, wild turkeys, ducks, snipe and doves, some deer and bear, but we did no hunting for them.

Our stay was pleasant, that is as pleasant as sulphur water and innumerable fleas would permit; the people we met were all pleasant and did all in their power to have us enjoy ourselves and make our trip a success, and it was with regret that I finally had to say good-bye to my partner and start for home. He had decided to spend another week in a different locality, which, by the way, he stretched in four more weeks, during which time the weather warmed up a little and he captured many more specimens, including some very fine diamondbacks and large cottonmouth moccasins, but then that's his story.

After the Fun of Vacation Days Young New York Awaits Its School Teachers



East Side boys ready for the fall school term. A familiar scene in front of public schools in New York on Monday morning, September 14; 745,000 children, 30,000 more than in 1913, started the term.